2: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1956
FR5 Ngoni FR5

boys and young men, so long as they were in the village. Ngoni men insisted that their children should be correctly trained, and they were contemptuous of Cewa and other tribal groups who left it 'all to the women'. The handing on of correct behaviour by the mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law was, they considered, essential, and one of the reasons why young men in the central kingdom liked to 'marry up' was that they could count on the careful grounding in all the canons of behaviour which their wives had received.

CHAPTER V

AGE SETS

THE Ngoni brought with them to Nyasaland an age-set system akin to that among the South-eastern Bantu, which was an important element in their social structure. In pre-European days the division into cattle-herders or pre-warriors, warriors, and post-warriors or senior men, regulated the tasks and responsibilities of boys and men in other spheres besides those of warfare. At the beginning of this section, when reviewing age sets as one of the constituent forms of Ngoni social organization, I said that some features of an age-set system had persisted. In comparison with age-grouping in the other Nyasaland tribes it was distinctively Ngoni in form; it influenced behaviour patterns in inter-group and intra-group relations; and in it were recognized certain responsibilities and activities belonging to the different groups based on age.

Among the distinctively Ngoni elements in the age-set system were the private nature of the puberty ritual and the absence of initiation schools; the organization of boys' life in the *laweni*; the strong ties between age mates up to marriage; the selective principle in designating senior men and women as *madoda* and *manina*; and a different kind of selective principle in the formation of friendship pacts between individuals of the same age. In observing the role of age sets in Ngoni village society, the two main groups which were constantly in evidence as groups were the older boys and girls and the senior men and women. These groups not only carried out activities together, but also showed evidence of the strength of the internal ties linking members of an age set. There were, however, no sharp edges to these groups, either in terms of actual age or physiological development or of exclusive membership. The following list of terms applied to age sets in the two main Ngoni areas shows primarily the difference in designation between males and females according to broad age grouping, but it illustrates also the fact that the terminology applied to the age sets did not always coincide

2: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1956
FR5 Ngoni FR5

561 888 affairs unless they were exceptionally vigorous mentally and physically, or the kind of dominating personality who could not be overlooked. It was evident also that individuals of weak character or evil disposition were not included in the group. I saw one or two such persons who bore a bad reputation in village society turned away from a senior group which was talking over a difficult village affair, with the caustic comment: 'Who is that worthless one? We cannot know him.' On the other hand, on social occasions when food or beer was being dispensed, all the old ones and the less reputable ones would be given their share, though sometimes with a cutting remark about the people who never missed a party but never did any work.

Selection in the senior age sets was intended to show that only persons who could be trusted, that is who were of known good character, were qualified to supervise the growing up of boys and girls, for whom the village elders as a group felt responsible. The maintenance of Ngoni standards of behaviour in young people was in the hands of this older group, who could and did exercise authority over and above that of the family and house. There were no more ardent supporters of Ngoni behaviour patterns than some of the older men and women of Ntumba clans in the central kingdom who had been brought up in the houses of Swazi or trans-Zambesi clans, and were recognized as *manina* and *madoda* in their villages.

561 576 Among the younger people below the group of elders, it was common to hear them address each other as *ntanga yami*, or *mnzanga*, 'my age mate'. Boys shouted it at each other on the cattle ground, young women called to each other in those terms when pounding maize, and when on a visit as an *ngoma* dance team it was a frequent form of address among the youths and girls. There was inherent in that form of address an ease of relationship, an absence of seniority or inferiority, and an acknowledgement of a tie which went beyond that of the family or house or clan. It was most commonly used within a village, but it was sometimes used between young people of different villages.

561 572 Within these groups of youths and girls and among young married men and women, there was a recognized friendship relation, *cibwenzi*, which existed as a rule between pairs of individuals of the same sex and age. It was sometimes a continuation of a playmate companionship; sometimes an expression of the need of a young boy in a *laweni* or a young married woman for a confidante or sympathizer. Most often it was a spontaneous specialized liking for another person, expressed invariably through an exchange of small gifts and generally of confidences, and often by going off together to bathe or cut firewood or catapult small birds. Such friendships were said as a rule to be permanent, though girls and women sometimes referred contemptuously to someone as 'She was my friend. Now she hates me and does not give me anything.' The decision to go off in search of work was often taken

2: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1956
FR5 Ngoni FR5

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by two youths who were friends and who announced their intention, and then were joined by other pairs.

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These forms of an age-set system which the Ngoni brought with them from the south were still in the 1930's a significant element in village life. The greatest change had occurred in the cessation of warfare and, with the enforcement of peace, the recognized stages mentioned in the beginning of this chapter had to a large extent disappeared. Though the boys and men were no longer divided into pre-warriors, warriors, and post-warriors, the institution of the *laweni* and the important role played by the *madoda* were two distinctive elements in Ngoni village life. So also was the form and content of the training given to Ngoni girls of Swazi clans, which largely determined the role played by the *manina* in village affairs.

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939)1960
FR5 Ngoni FR5

843 593 562 little children. They are not able to hear those things which belong to pregnancy.' The men on their part accepted the role of being ignorant of what was coming, though they were generally aware of it. It was an elaborate piece of role-playing, standardized by custom, emphasizing the separation of the men's and women's worlds in Ngoni life, and giving control and authority into the experienced hands of the senior women.

843 606 572 The Ngoni culture pattern forbade the wife to tell her mother-in-law herself about her condition. She had, as so often in the Ngoni pattern, to approach first a friend who was her confidante, who might be another young wife or a helper in the household. This friend had to tell her mother-in-law, the future paternal grandmother of the baby, who was destined to play a big part in the child's upbringing.

During the months of pregnancy a Ngoni woman carried on with her normal work in the household, including cooking for her husband. If she feared a miscarriage, and suffered from what was called 'a shaking inside', she stayed quietly in the hut, and, saying that she had a headache, asked her husband to call her friend. Then the friend told the mother-in-law who sent for a 'doctor' to bring medicines 'to make the inside not shake'. A young Ngoni woman did not expect

843 152 to have miscarriages, and feared that her husband's relatives would blame her home for not giving her enough food before marriage to make her strong and healthy in childbearing.

The fear of invidious comparisons with her own home and upbringing also operated when the wife felt herself near to labour. She would keep on working up to the last minute, for if she told her friend that her time was come, and the friend summoned the senior women, they came to examine her. Should they find on examination that she was not about to deliver, they looked at her and said, 'What are you afraid of? Did you call us for fear?' The young wife was ashamed of being thought fearful, both for her own reputation and

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939)1960
FR5 Ngoni FR5

606 handle them, as well as how to conform to required behaviour. So she put up with present restrictions for the sake of future peace and harmony. Her lot was to live there with her husband's people, and the birth of the child was a strong link in the chain which bound her to them. Meantime she
● [572] found some relief in her friends among the other young wives, and particularly with the one in whom she placed her confidence, and who acted as her go-between with her mother-in-law.

Wife to husband

593 Throughout the intricate and often vexing relations with her mother-in-law and other senior women, the husband-wife relationship remained for the young mother a steadying and constant factor. She had been attracted to him in courtship;
[58] she had had the chance of accepting or refusing him when the marriage proposals were made; the cattle had been handed over to her father to seal the marriage contract. For all these and other reasons she held on to her love for her husband and her relationship with him, whatever overbearing behaviour might be shown her by his relatives. Hence she took care of his possessions in the hut they shared, helping the senior women to send them out of the hut just before the confinement. She redirected food towards him when it was sent to her during her confinement, gladly going short herself in order to prove her devotion. She was glad that after coming out of the hut, having a nurse girl meant that she could keep her body and her clothes clean and sweet-smelling and therefore pleasing to him. She was happy when the ritual cleansing of the hut and of herself made it possible for her to cook for her husband again and endear him to her by that means. When weaning the child caused her pain and frustration, there was at the same time a deep satisfaction that full intercourse was now officially permitted
[834] between her and her husband, and that they were free to have another child.

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1960
FR5 Ngoni FR5

All of them made their own axes, knobkerries and catapults for hunting. Some were interested in music and made shepherds' pipes, or one-stringed lyres, or hand pianos of metal strips affixed to a wooden base. They composed their own songs and airs for these instruments. Others showed ingenuity in making elaborate models of lorries and aeroplanes, or in carving heads of animals. Others liked to weave fibre into the wide-brimmed hats some herd-boys wore.

More significant still for their future social relationships, they began now to choose their own intimate friend and to form the friendship pacts which were characteristic of Ngoni society, and regarded by adults as important in the child's development. In the friendship pacts, especially those between boys, there was no implied or manifest restraint. They could have 'joking relations', and hence say outrageous things to each other. They could quarrel and make it up, and defy each other's wishes and decisions, without a final breach. The relationship between friends often lasted into later adult life, and was probably all the stronger for the occasional lapses and outbursts, and by the fact that in the daily companionship of friends the burden of observing 'respect' did not oppress them.

The boys' dormitory

The hut known as the boys' dormitory and the whole system of living which it represented was a traditional feature of Ngoni village life. In their culture it had three main purposes. Formerly, when as they said 'War was our school', it was the place where boys slept and lived together, and where they learned to defend themselves and to obey authority. It was in a sense the preparatory school for the regiment, and the herding of cattle was the basis of the curriculum. Once a boy went to sleep in a dormitory he never left it until he married, unless he was seriously ill. In the days of warfare, he learned in the dormitory and out herding the cattle, a knowledge of the bush and its wild life and of his fellows, and

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939) 1960
FR5 Ngoni FR5

given to giggling and putting their head on one side when asked questions. They took their school work seriously in order to show that they, the Ngoni girls, were the intelligent ones. They were also aware that the number of cattle to be transferred at their marriage would be greater according to whether they finished school in Standard II, III, IV, or even VI.

Apart from going to school, which was only for the daughters of relatively forward-looking Ngoni fathers, the girls continued to take part in the daily routine of the household. They and their companions, according to their growth and strength and pleasure, did a little pounding, fetching water, grinding grain, roasting ground-nuts. In a large household, where there were many helpers, the daughters of the family only did as much as they felt inclined of the domestic chores. As they said: 'It was like our play.' They spent more time with the young children, or washing themselves and their clothes by the stream. Combing and dressing their hair, rubbing fat or oil on their skin, threading beads, plaiting grass or fibres, learning how to make Ngoni bead designs for head bands or wristlets—all these formed the lighter and more amusing side of the daily routine.

From among the girls in this exclusive and protected girls' circle, Ngoni girls chose a particular friend, whom they always addressed as 'my friend', even if she were a classificatory sister or cousin. As with the boys in the dormitory this friend was a confidante to whom a girl could talk freely about her life in the compound, her likes and dislikes among the other girls and women, her ideas about suitors and marriage. The friend was always from another compound and of a leading Ngoni clan. The two friends made bracelets and necklets for each other, and went to bathe in the stream together. Sometimes the friendship lasted until the girls were married and separated. At times it broke up suddenly in a violent quarrel. There was however a curious tenacity about these friendship pacts, and they were more often maintained

3: Read E-5 (1935-1939)1960
FR5 Ngoni FR5

572 than dissolved. The element of secrecy in the confidence exchanged gave the girls a much-needed sense of privacy, and the freedom of being able to say anything to the friend was a relief from the constant guard on speech and manners.

535 The girls had dance-groups, and practised dancing in or near a compound. Each group had an 'owner' who called 571 the others together and organized the dancing. These were several dance-groups, in contrast with the boys' single group, [578] and the girls' groups were often rent by internal quarrels, leading to splits in the groups.

865 The dance-groups, and other little knots of girls, often had violent quarrels in which all their latent aggression came to the surface. They shouted at each other, scratched each other's faces and burst into tears of anger and frustration. If senior Ngoni women were around when these scenes took place, they generally broke in and rebuked the 'owner' of the group and sent them all home. Sometimes they deliberately turned their backs, leaving the girls to fight it out among themselves, or hoping the 'owner' would restore order. The senior women, rather unobtrusively as a rule, kept an eye on the girls in their dance-groups and at other times, and were adept at summing up their characters and looking out for signs of leadership and of ability to control others.

157 One type of leadership was often shown when a girl collect- 538 ed younger children together, for singing, games or for tell- 555 ing stories in a recitative form with a refrain in which the others joined. There was a certain kind of skill in reciting these stories, recognized alike by the children listening and by adults watching from a distance. The Ngoni believed that this skill was due to a gift for eloquence, not so far removed from the eloquence of the man who chanted the praises of the chiefs, or the man who composed his own songs. This eloquence was said to come 'from the chest'. Ngoni men and women passing a group of children spellbound at the recital of a story would say: 'Ha! look at that one. She has that which is of the chest—real eloquence.'